



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

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UNITED STATES FUNDS EFFORT TO RELOCATE ELEPHANTS
THREATENED BY ZIMBABWE DROUGHT

Secretary of the Interior Manuel Lujan today announced that the United States will provide \$200,000 in emergency relief for African elephants in drought-stricken southeastern Zimbabwe.

"Once again, the United States is taking a leadership role in protecting the African elephant," said Lujan. "This action reaffirms President Bush's strong commitment to conserving wildlife resources, whether here at home or on another continent."

The funding will support a relocation effort underway by the Zimbabwe government to move about 400 elephants to areas where food and water are more plentiful.

"An operation of this magnitude has never before been attempted and may carry some risks, but these are desperate times for Zimbabwe's elephants. We must try," said Fish and Wildlife Service Director John Turner. "This effort to save the elephants, like the 1989 U.S.-led ban on ivory trade, demonstrates the United States' determination to help African countries manage and sustain their elephant populations."

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The action comes at the request of the Zimbabwe government, which appealed for funds under the United States' African Elephant Conservation Act (AECA). The act, administered by the Fish and Wildlife Service, provides grants to African countries for elephant population management and conservation.

The elephants are being moved from Zimbabwe's Gonarezhou ("Home of the Elephant") National Park to surrounding farmland. The country's worst drought in decades has left the park nearly devoid of vegetation, with little remaining surface water for elephants and other wildlife.

About 5,200 elephants, almost double the number the park can sustain, are competing for food and water with other wildlife. Conditions are so severe the Zimbabwe government has been forced to thin the elephant herd to prevent drastic losses and permanent damage to the park's wildlife habitat. The U.S.-supported relocation effort is reducing the number of elephants that must be culled from the herd.

Meat from culled animals is being distributed to local communities whose people are facing severe food shortages. Area farmers, whose livestock and crops have been decimated by the drought, have agreed to refrain from grazing cattle on their land and allow wildlife to repopulate the region.

"In addition to saving these animals from almost certain death, the relocation expands the African elephant's range outside the park into areas where they have been absent for decades. This effort is being endorsed and assisted by the local community," Turner said. "The move will also help protect the little remaining vegetation inside the park which is so critical to other wildlife species."

Elephants, most of them young animals, are being tranquilized and moved by truck. U.S. assistance will provide the Zimbabwe Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management with funds to contract for aircraft, helicopters, and transport vehicles, and for the purchase of tranquilizer drugs and equipment, and food and water for the elephants until they are released. The Zimbabwe government will provide personnel and additional funding for the move. The effort is expected to take about 60 days.

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